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ABSTRACT

The Continuing Professional Education Project at The Pennsylvania State University is described. Five professions were involved: architecture, accounting, clinical psychology, clinical dietetics, and nursing. The objectives were: (1) to bring the university and the professions into collaboration, (2) to focus continuing education activities as closely as possible to the needs of the profession at the point of practice, and (3) to develop the basis for a long-term association by institutionalizing the professional development process in both the university and the respective professional associations. Preliminary findings concerning the practice situations, the profession in general, and project activities are presented. Commonalities among the professions included: the essential paradigm of professional practice is one of problem-solving; professionals have difficulty in achieving a global or holistic view of their activities; performance is judged within the profession by a standard of competence and scale of excellence; the profession team design, with its emphasis on the consensual process of decision-making and collegial relationship, is an effective vehicle for collaboration; and new strategies are emerging for the definition, format, and pricing of continuing professional education programs. (SW)

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Sixth International Conference on Higher Education
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Study Group 3: Post-Experience Education

CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR PROFESSIONALS: A PRACTICE-ORIENTED APPROACH

August 1984

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Settings for Continuing Education

Universities today are faced continuously with suggestions, even demands, that they take on additional activities, adopt new missions, or shift to a different set of priorities This paper describes a rationale, an analytical and experimental approach, and the first outcomes generated by a project that responds to one of those demands, the search for more effective continuing education for established practitioners in five professions.

To understand the nature of the choices that confront academic leaders, whether administrators or faculty, it is necessary to take account of the origins of these multiplex requests and expectations that come to the gates of universities. Some of them arise from chronic social dilemnas for which education appears to offer a last resort. Examples are found in the need to retrain large sectors of the labor force cast adrift by economic change or in the urgent demand to repair oversights in the educational system such as the neglect of advanced training options for women. Other demands are direct products of political commitments such as "guarantees" of equal access to the traditional mechanism of socio-economic advancement, high-level training. The United States has pursued and continues to pursue solutions to these demands as part of its populist-democratic tradition. The path is beset, however, with increasing difficulty.

Another source, perhaps a principal phenomenon of our age, generates the greatest challenges for universities everywhere. The changing nature of human knowledge and the rising level of technology are producing an "information revolution." Nobel laureate, Herbert A. Simon, presented one summary: "In recorded history there have been perhaps three pulses of change powerful enough to alter man in basic ways. The introduction of agriculture ... The Industrial Revolution ... the revolution in information processing technology

of the computer ..." (1969). Stonier of Bradford University captures the essence of this transformation in a slightly different historical framework. The first revolution in industrial societies, he notes, involved machines that extended human muscles. A second involved machines that extend the human nervous system through accelerated, wide-ranging communication. Third is the computer-based revolution made up of machines that extend the human brain (Large, 1982). Other components of the information revolution such as the high value of new knowledge, rapid conversion of knowledge to application, and heuristic value of technology were discussed by Bell (1973) and others under the rubric of the "post-industrial society." Universities are engaged with this revolution at every border of the organization. Some of the early analysts, notably Bell and Kahn (1967), saw the university as the pre-eminent institution of the knowledge society and professors as the high priests. It has not turned out that way at all. Research and teaching have spread rapidly into so many other settings that some industrial sites have as many attributes of academe as the campus. Nothing has come automatically to the universities except new choices. Rich choices, varied choices, it is true but only if they can be translated into action. Among the demands and choices universities will be well advised to explore are those which promise to fulfill in some way the traditions and strengths of the institution.

The established professions are subject to the same societal forces. Closely held special knowledge, complex in itself and made more complex by artifacts of language and technique, once created a professional mystique. Now much of that knowledge is easily available to readers, sometimes in commercial packages, or it has fallen into the province of semi-professionals. There are challenges to the traditional modes of practice in the form of consumer watch-dog groups and in spates of malpractice suits. Specialization

has forced the development of intricate networks of relationship among professionals and concerns about the boundaries of practice. In his comprehensive work, Houle (1981), notes that professions are no longer simply institutions of status or position, but organizations continuously engaged in "professionalization," the process of defining and maintaining the attributes that sustain their status. High on the list of urgent topics is the task of helping the individual practitioner keep up to date on knowledge and technique and thereby to lessen vulnerability to criticism.

Customarily in the U.S. most of the continuing education for practitioners has been conducted within the professional society or association. These workshops, seminars, clinical sessions, lectures, and conferences are framed by the technical needs of day-to-day practice. There is some difficulty in reaching topics that involve other professions or require ethical or espistemological judgments. The educational "needs" are determined by the immediate requirements of practitioners who are willing to pay for the information not only in terms of direct charges, but also in terms of foregone income during the time devoted to study or participation.

Another method of keeping practitioners in touch with change originates in universities. Professors who are at the frontier of a particular area of knowledge identify a component which is likely to bear on practice and they offer a class, course, or seminar in the academic setting and format. In some cases, professional schools affiliated with universities, the usual situation in the U.S., will conduct programs for mid-career professionals. For the most part, however, professorial attention is directed to the initial preparation of practitioners up to the point of first certification.

The common algorithm of education is that schooling is a response to learning "needs." Needs assessment is a widely used term and becomes the

essential step in any program of continuing education. But, as Lindsay and Crowe (1984) have noted, educational needs is an "unbounded concept" that derives meaning from a particular framework of assessment. In the approaches cited above for professional up-dating the needs are derived, in one case, from the choices of individual practitioners and in the other from new knowledge and technique. The project reported in this paper is designed to bring together elements from each approach. Further, it is designed to present the broad resources of the university but keep touch with the specific conditions of practice. The ultimate goal is a set of "learning packages" (they may take a variety of forms) that bring together the best thinking of both faculty and practitioners.

The Continuing Professional Education Project at PSU

The Continuing Professional Education Project at The Pennsylvania State University is just entering the final year of a five-year effort. It came about through a merging of the long-standing interest of the Kellogg Foundation in a better quality of service to consumers with the experience of the University in continuing education and "post-experience" education, in many forms and settings. Penn State conducts one of the largest programs of this type in the world enrolling upwards of 50,000 persons annually in short-cycle training, non-degree study, workshops, seminars, and courses. The Office of Planning Studies was a natural locus for such an endeavor. Because of the implications this new activity may hold for the structure and function of academic institutions, the Center for the Study of Higher Education is associated with the project. Funding to cover the substantial costs of involving a large number of professionals in an experimental setting has come from the Kellogg Foundation, the University, each of the fourteen participating

professional associations (state and national), and interested private donors. Five professions are engaged with the design here; architecture, accounting, clinical psychology, clinical dietetics, and nursing. Medicine is following a different pattern based in community hospitals.

The objectives are: (1) to bring the university and the professions into collaboration, (2) to focus continuing education activities as close as possible to the needs of the profession at the point of practice, (3) to develop the basis for a long-term association by institutionalizing the CPE development process in both the university and the respective professional associations. Collaboration, practice-orientation, and institutionalization, these are the key concepts that guide the operating procedures over the five-year term. The final outcome is the delivery of at least one educational program for each profession. At the time of this report the design of those programs is well advanced and one, for clinical psychologists, has been successfully field-tested.

Selection of the Professions

From the start it was clear that the intensity of the relationship would limit the number of professions that could be involved. There was also the unending question, one on which there are high feelings and sensitive egos, about which occupations are truly professionalized. Fortunately the latest compilation from a study that reached back to 1974 provided a good beginning. Using the licensing and certification laws of the state of Pennsylvania, Queeney, Hanniford, and Twitchell (May 1981) identified about 78 occupations controlled in the public interest. The same compilation listed those persons at the University who held some relationship to each profession. The collection procedure gave particular attention to about 25 acknowledged professions.

Without a great deal of refined analysis, it was possible to make a list of professions that were the most likely candidates, about 15 or 16.

At this point the nature of participation was carefully examined and thirty-two very specific criteria identified. About a third of these helped signal the most eligible prospects and the remainder enabled the staff to get down to a final eight. The national advisory committee, a distinguished and experienced group of professionals, guided the selection of the final six. A publication rehearses the full process but here we need note only those which in retrospect were especially important (Queeney & Melander, 1984). The selected profession had to be an "established" body, that is to say its rise to professional status had to be complete. Some emerging occupational groups saw the participation as a means to public confirmation. We also looked for a major dominant professional organization whose rolls included most of the practitioners. Making the point of liaison the professional association rather than a governmental licensing body or a representative consumer advocacy group turned out to be a factor critical to success. The profession had to be characterized by a generic body of practice, a set of knowledge, skills, and applications everyone was expected to know. In the case of engineering, which is an acknowledged profession in the U.S., for example, there was no common core of generic practice, only specialties. The final candidate professions were also expected to have demonstrated an interest, action preferably, in setting up practice standards, usually in the form of a detailed role delineation for the field. There had to be evidence, too, of an appreciation for the importance of continuing education. The range of evidence was very wide, however, for accounting has a superb national network of offerings totaling almost 200 courses, while the clinical dieticians have taken only the initial steps.

There were some simple common sense criteria: the number of professionals in the State had to be sufficient to hold promise of continuous participation. As an example, lanscape architects are well organized, but they number only a few hundred. To complete the liaison there had to be a faculty group, department or program, that was involved with the profession at several levels and in various ways. Finally, there was an expectation of commitment over five years from the professional body. In the early stages consideration was given to a written contract, but this gave way to a strong informal commitment on all sides.

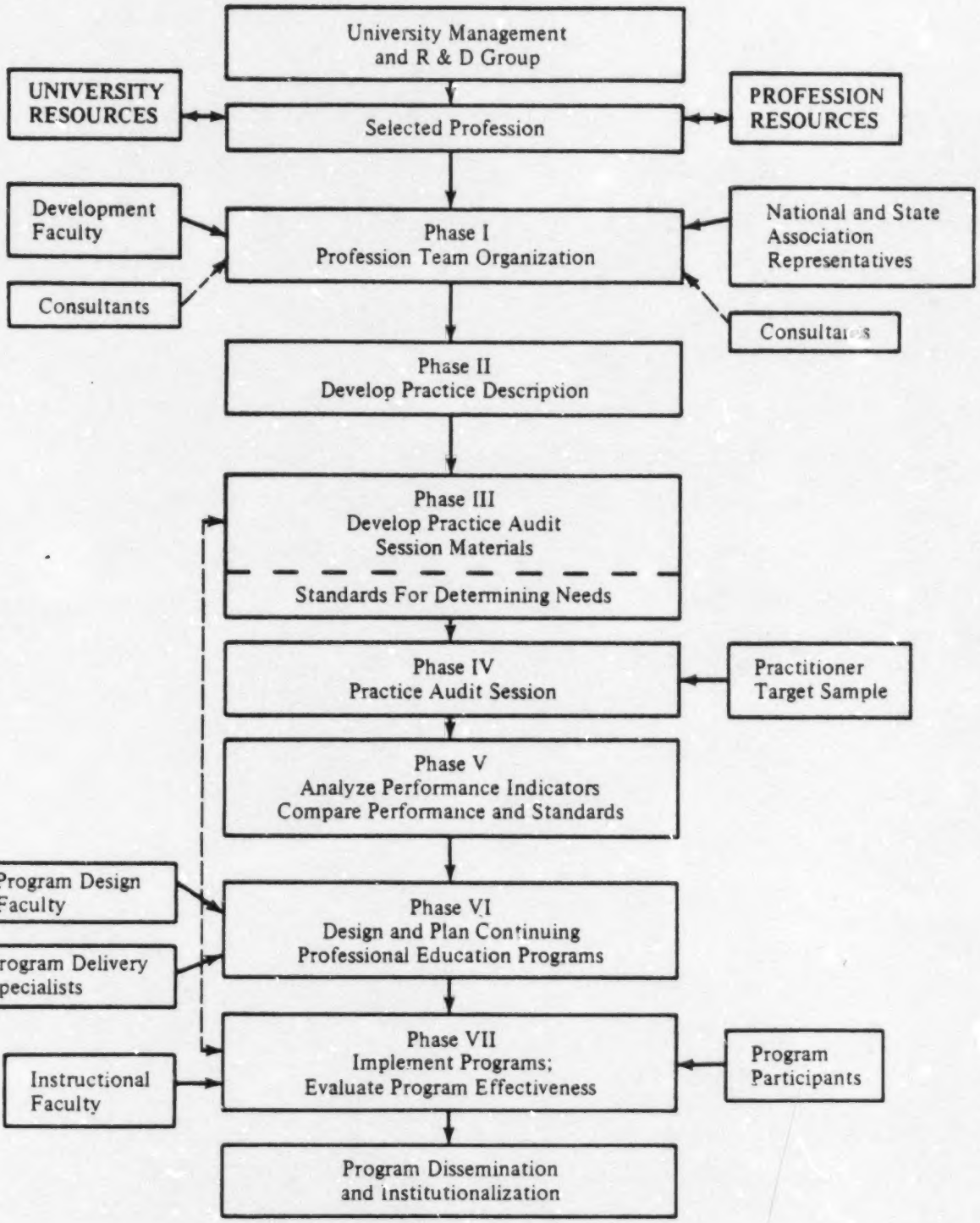
Fixing Attention on Practice

Fixing on the conditions at the point of practice in order to determine educational needs is a reasonable objective that has captured the attention of many who work in continuing education for professionals. How to do this without violating the privacy of clients or jeopardizing the reputation of practitioners is the essential problem. At the disposal of the project staff was the experience of the American Pharmaceutical Society. This body reported a very good introductory experience with the application of an audit approach to the examination of practice. Building on the essential concepts a fully elaborated model for the CPE Development Project at Penn State was prepared. A schematic diagram is displayed in Figure 1. The details of development are described in a recent monograph (Smutz et al., March 1981).

The Practice Audit Model accurately describes the important sequence of events followed by the Project. Indeed, one tentative conclusion is that such a sequential model is entirely workable. Rather than follow a step-by-step discussion our purposes and brevity as well will be better served by considering the main thread of ideas. We will then turn to several operational features.

FIGURE 1

Practice Audit Model



The first substantive activity in the Model (Phase II) is to establish with as much clarity as possible the body of generic practice, that is, the knowledge, skills, and judgment called forth by practice in key segments of the field. The experienced practitioners on the Profession Team were given summaries of role delineation studies, surveys, practice analysis, and whatever other material the staff could assemble to help arrive at a "practice description." From this description the Team constructed a set of assessment experiences, often actual vignettes of practice. A sample drawn from those in general practice gathered in day-long sessions to experience the "audit" of practice represented in these vignettes (Phase IV). The sessions included TV tapes, live actors in face-to-face, one-to-one encounters, written responses, and clinical simulations. By examining the collective performance, not the individual performance, the profession teams gained a close reading of proficiency, deficiency, and ambiguity in practice. From an evaluation of group performance, a process that required much analysis and judgment, a set of "needs" were established. These specific areas of need became for each profession the basis for a learning program.

At the present time, those programs are in the design stage. Instructional technologists have come in as consultants and contributors to complete this task. At the same time, preparations are being made to deliver the programs to active practitioners.

THE PROFESSION TEAM

A Collaborative Approach

The heart of the operation is the Profession Team. They carry representation from the state and national professional associations, usually licensed practitioners who have a special interest and experience with programs for

updating professional competence. From the academic world two or three experienced professors joined the team. Two members of the Project Staff worked with each team and consultants were brought in whenever needed. The working sessions rarely involved more than ten persons. Throughout the teams have operated on a consensual and collegial basis. To help establish this principle a group process expert conducted the early meetings of each team and, later, staff members assumed a coordinating and facilitating function. This mode of operation had the advantage of allowing the most natural areas of expertise to emerge as needed. When course design, testing, or pre-certification matters arose, the professors took the lead. When procedural topics were paramount, the staff moved in. Very early this collegial approach generated personal commitment to the tasks and a good level of interaction. Feedback and follow-up by the staff on the products of each meeting was carefully and fully developed so that a sense of action, movement, and decisiveness was cultivated.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

With many of the activities now completed, it is possible to summarize the observations of the staff, all thoroughly immersed in the day-to-day details, into preliminary findings.

Commonalities across the five professions are the main thread and these observations fall under three headings, the practice situations, the profession in general, and activities of the Project.

A. The Practice Situation

1. Almost no one practices a profession in isolation even though professional education tends to concentrate on the autonomy of the individual professional in the preparation of neophytes. The

associations take several forms and engage a variety of "significant others". In some cases there are loose networks, in others formally organized groups, and in still other circumstances a distinct team of practitioners. A high degree of specialization within the fields prompts some of this association but there also are important linkages between different professions created to meet the complex requirements of a practice situation.

2. The simple definition of "client" for many professions has become complex. The clienteles include a variety of entities including corporations, families, communities, committees, and agencies, not just individuals. There is, in many cases, a proximate client but an extended clientele.

3. The interactive process in several forms has particular importance in professional practice. Among practitioners there is an eagerness to exchange experiences. They like to talk about what they do. In profession team meetings and in the practice audit sessions the participants found high value in the informal exchange. In part this is an exchange of current information but it also is a subtle means of self-evaluation, testing one's own views by comparison.

With respect to client interaction, we see evidence of growing interest and attention to the quality of interpersonal exchange. Because information from the client and understanding by the client is so important, there is an active interest in the skills that shape rapport: listening, language, feedback, etc. There is also a genuine enthusiasm for serving the client interest and clear recognition that the quality of advocacy is affected by the quality of interaction.

4. The essential paradigm of professional practice is one of problem-solving. The standard procedures of data gathering, analysis, planning, implementation, and, less often, evaluation, are visible in most practice situations. Whether there are situations where approaches other than a "treatment model" are more appropriate, for example a learning model or a developmental model, is an interesting question still ahead for most of these professions.

5. It is difficult for practitioners to achieve a "global" or holistic view of their activities. There is a strong tendency to look for technical flaws and specific causality, to particularize, rather than to consider the full configuration of the practice situation or the environment. One function of continuing education should probably be to remedy "tunnel vision."

B. Attributes of the Profession

1. Just about all of the professions are beset by anxieties about their state or status; their ability to survive in their present form, the resolution of internal tensions, and new forms of competition. In some cases this tension is the product of environmental changes beyond control of the profession. Examples are the emergent power of third party payers in health fields, government regulations in the form of both administrative and enacted laws in accounting, and the energy crunch in architecture. With those professions practiced in an institutional context there are dilemmas arising from differential demands and standards, one set from the profession at large, another from the employing agency. Another dilemma arises around questions of attaining commensurate status, public recognition, and respect as a profession upgrades its standards and performance.

One source of anxiety seems to be diminishing. The tendency to install external control mechanisms in the form of coercive legislation or lay commissions has lessened. Responsibility is coming back to professional bodies, albeit with strings attached.

2. Performance is judged within the profession along two lines, a standard of competence and scale of excellence. The standard of adequate performance is susceptible to quite accurate judgment by professionals. In professions that are trying to upgrade their status there is often a tendency to reach toward the high side in defining competence and also some tendency to impose "theoretical" or "academic" standards. Most professions are quite prepared to make judgments that distinguish competence from inadequate performance.

Beyond the competence level another set of criteria come into play to identify the excellent and "superperformer." This represents an intraprofessional standard of quality and has the attributes of esthetic judgments founded on distinctions of style.

C. The Components of the Project

1. The profession team design, with its emphasis on the consensual process of decision making and collegial relationship, is an effective vehicle for collaboration. There was a distinct absence of "gamesmanship" for position and members are characterized by shifting roles dependent on the topic being considered. There is appropriate recognition of expertise in various areas and a focus on content rather than influence or power.

The method by which the teams established ownership in the project often involved an opening position of skepticism, or rejection of the initial idea.

Acceptance and accommodation came only from hard work, testing ideas, and detailed review. The team members recognized from the outset the distinctive features of the Project. The clearest evidence of commitment to the material came in the Practice Audit Sessions where the team members stood behind the exercises as a "best effort" at assessment.

There are perceptible differences among the teams in the way they function and the differences appear to be related to the strength of the representational role of members.

2. Professions have demonstrated a "readiness" to explore CPE but there are still many open questions about the forms it may take. From the participant professions there are a number of positive indications on their views of the Project activities. The membership of the profession teams has been relatively stable through three years. No professional association has exhibited any disposition to withdraw or to reduce their commitment, even though in several cases participation is reviewed each year. Several have increased their tangible contributions and encouraged other sources to provide funds for practice audit sessions.

The primary motivations for participation vary rather widely from association to association. While all professions subscribe to the project notion that practice-oriented CPE has great promise, few have that as the primary reason for involvement. For some, the motivation is curiosity, healthy curiosity, to make certain no new methodologies are overlooked. For others it is part of a search for status advancement. In still other cases participation is a beginning of a CPE effort.

The present relationships are built on a high level of activity. It is not clear that collaboration will continue pro forma without a set of continuing, important functions.

3. New directions and strategies are emerging for the definition, format, and pricing of continuing professional education programs. The project's concept of practice-oriented CPE programs has been given further substance through experiences with conducting the five practice audit sessions and then participant feedback. The practice audit environment, which stressed small groups with profession team leaders, a collegial atmosphere, peer interaction, and opportunity for informal feedback, was praised by the professionals and it has been identified as a paradigm for CPE programs. This approach to CPE programming, which we also have characterized as performance-oriented, can be contrasted with knowledge-oriented CPE, a more familiar, traditional, and, for the most part, less costly mode.

4. The project work so far has captured many but not all of the essential features of the practice situation. The reactions of participants in the practice audit sessions, for the most part, support the view that the role delineation and exercises moved closer to the realities of practice than most of the assessment experiences they have had.

In looking at the performance of practitioners in the practice audit sessions, most of the teams reflected surprise and sometimes dissappointment with the results. This does not necessarily reflect low competence since other determinants may be operating. The profession teams tended to set exercises on the demanding side of practice putting aside the routine and ordinary situations. They

also tended to set tasks in specialists' terms. The evaluation process will sort out the essential factors that mark the performance.

SUMMARY

From the start there has been an intention to establish the proven parts of the project on a permanent basis. This means that a set of new activities with their attendant values, attitudes, and beliefs are to be "institutionalized" in several different organizations. To help illuminate some of the issues and possibilities several research endeavors dealing with organizational change were undertaken.

One dealt with the intricacies of the "boundary spanner" roles carried by most of the profession team members (Smutz, 1984). Another examined the possibility of modifying the faculty role as a method of introducing CPE (Toombs, Lindsay, and Hettinger, 1984). In progress is a study of how the academic department might view the organizational changes. Of continuing concern is the validity of this approach to needs, a topic addressed by Lindsay and Crowe (1984).

Along with the research a set of "try and fit" approaches has been undertaken. Those professional associations with extensive programs of continuing educators have been engaged in discussions pointed toward contractual relationships covering the new materials that come from this Project.

One test of related concepts such as those woven into this project is their generative capacity, the force they demonstrate to spin-off, differentiate, and interconnect new ideas. Any judgment of the success or failure of the CPE Development Project would be premature at this point and perhaps, even in the ultimate stage, irrelevant. But, in terms of generative

power, the ideas of the practice audit, of collaboration, and institutionalization have demonstrated their worth. We expect to pursue the possibilities they hold out into other areas of professional practice, advanced education, and academic organization.

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